Friends of Reform: The Correspondence of J. Horace McFarland and Mira Lloyd Dock

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Messiah University is a Christian university of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.
ABSTRACT: The City Beautiful movement in Harrisburg benefited from the partnership of two key reformers, J. Horace McFarland and Mira Lloyd Dock. A close reading of their correspondence offers insight into the nature of their relationship, their personal views, and reflections on the long-term effects of City Beautiful. 

KEYWORDS: City Beautiful, Mira Lloyd Dock, J. Horace McFarland, reform networks, community

“... I think you have better burn this letter. Yours truly, J. Horace McFarland.”¹ So ends a letter written by McFarland to Mira Lloyd Dock in 1905, conveying his frustrations about the lack of progress in the reform of Harrisburg’s educational system. This is but one example of a rich correspondence of friendship and reform that spanned nearly half a century.² With a shared interest in horticulture and conservation, as well as their mutual investments in urban reform, McFarland and Dock wrote so frequently that their letters often crossed in the mail. Their correspondence is significant for a study of the City Beautiful movement in that it offers a look into the minds of two key reformers who used their collective energies to turn Harrisburg from a city characterized by industrial blight into a modern metropolis. An examination of these letters provides insight into how Dock and McFarland complemented each other, freely shared their personal views
with one another, and developed a friendship lasting throughout the course of their lives.

As the catalysts for Harrisburg’s urban reform program, Dock and McFarland worked together tirelessly to influence different social and political spheres within their community. They utilized these networks to push individuals to implement their vision of a better and cleaner cities; as they recommended to other Pennsylvania communities large and small, they urged Harrisburg’s residents to maintain its open parks. Dock, a botanist who had studied at the University of Michigan, traveled across Europe and America, learning from and experiencing the great metropolises of the world. As one of Harrisburg’s top “clubwomen,” Dock kept in contact with the entire city and had a direct line to organizations and committees that allowed her to lobby for change. She attended park preservation committee meetings, advised on Forest Leaves publications, provided hundreds of trees to local organizations, and exercised her leadership in the Civic Club of Harrisburg, which she had helped establish.

McFarland, a publisher, photographer, and horticulturist, likewise used his expertise and resources to create change in the Harrisburg community. His photography and publications, coupled with his and Dock’s lectures on improvement, exposed Harrisburg’s poor condition and inspired people of all walks of life to volunteer their time and money to further the cause. The two had an established friendship even before 1898 when they increasingly corresponded about upcoming lectures and speeches (see Susan Rimby, “Mira Lloyd Dock and the City Beautiful Campaign,” and Linda A. Ries, “The Crusade Against Ugliness: J. Horace McFarland and Photography,” in this issue).

The correspondence that developed between the two contributed to the work of urban reform even as it fostered personal connection through joviality, wisdom, and careful advice. The letters illustrate what McFarland expressed in other publications: a deep belief that the connections between ordinary people were required for success. The variety of letters that are preserved in their respective collections at the Pennsylvania State Archives reveal that from the time of their meeting, these two bonded over their unique expertise and personal convictions. Many of their letters are a conglomeration of business proposals and light-hearted banter generated from their shared interests in horticulture and conservation. Some reference possible visits from McFarland and his wife to Dock’s home in
Fayetteville, Pennsylvania. The letters also mention projects in other regions of Pennsylvania and beyond such as a request from McFarland for Dock’s help on a matter in Eagle’s Mere in Sullivan County, Pennsylvania, as well as Dock’s offer to gift a mutual colleague with one hundred pine seedlings, which he gladly accepted.

As might be expected, their early correspondence revolved around questions of the nature of urban reform. They worked to provide speaking opportunities in one another’s spheres. Regarding an upcoming lecture in 1903, for example, McFarland asked Dock to speak about her experience and connections as a woman in the movement: “If you could speak on the part of the women in the Harrisburg movement, I should think that would be a very live and satisfactory subject. . . . Anything, I am sure, that you care to say will be most gladly listened to.” They also exchanged letters about the value of photographs for convincing an audience. In reference to one of McFarland’s presentations to the Board of Trade, Dock lauded his “perfect” choice of images that marked progress in the movement. They also commended each other and praised their respective achievements: for example, McFarland expressed to Dock in 1901 his belief that their entire success was due “in the first place to your enthusiasm.” Throughout the movement they constantly relied on each other for advice and information regarding their shared interest in horticulture.

The letters also frequently focus on McFarland’s issues with individuals who were involved in the politics of the movement. In a letter dated to 1905, he critiques the Park Commission for their ignorance: “I will also say, privately, just in your ear, not to be mentioned, entre nous, that some of the members of our Commission do not know a pine from a pumpkin.” McFarland often wrote about those in the movement with whom he struggled to work, as well as those opposed to his Progressive ideals. In various letters, he griped about allies who rambled at meetings and took up valuable time, men who meant well but could not be trusted, and people who pushed against the movement. In a 1915 letter about educational reform, for example, he wrote that the Pennsylvania system “is so far behind the New York system . . . it is time that the vast sums of money spent on the schools of Pennsylvania be turned to real use. I could nominate the corpses for at least twenty-five large and important funerals, which would vastly clear the atmosphere of education!” In a
letter of 1905 he claimed that a good man who was not supportive of their cause was possibly mentally unbalanced. Although Dock shared McFarland’s commitments and goals, she tended to be less emotional in her letters and often suggested more practical solutions to the dilemmas they faced.

The relationship, correspondence, and commitment to Harrisburg lasted well beyond the peak of the Progressive Era movement to their final years. By the 1940s both had become weary in their pursuit of reform. In one letter from 1942 Dock confessed to McFarland that she was struggling to settle many different affairs in places like Cook Forest and the Joseph Priestley House at Northumberland: “Well I am just downhearted and am too old, and too poor since 1933 to do anything but ‘take it.’” McFarland also wrote to Dock in 1942, just six years before his death, “If it weren’t for the continuous operations of old anno Domini, I would like to stay with this League [Harrisburg League of Municipal Improvements] another forty years.” The
Dear Dr. McFarland—Thank you very much for your informing letter of the 6th about the Municipal League staffs.

By this mail I am sending my check—a small one—to Mr. Schmidt, and as to state affairs about Ricketts Glen, the Lack Forest, and the Priestley House at Northumberland—Will be just downhearted, and am too old, and too far since 1933, to do anything but “take it.”

There is one thing that I am going to do for myself, and that is to ask for two dozen cards like the enclosed, where convivial.

I would so love to see you and Mr. McFarland Helen, and perhaps some day we can meet.

With best wishes to you all, from

Mira L. Dock

Figure 2. Correspondence from Mira Lloyd Dock to J. Horace McFarland, February 12, 1942, MG-89m.1, Box 1, J. Horace McFarland Papers, Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg, PA.
tone of this exchange exemplifies their comfort with each other and demonstrates the vulnerability that characterized their relationship.

McFarland and Dock sometimes reflected with nostalgia on situations they had faced, writing about both their successes and failures, reminiscing on the wisdom they had gained throughout their mishaps. McFarland observed, “It is part of our actual Christian democratic freedom that we should go wrong part of the time because we must be free to make fools of ourselves, and we seem to live up to that freedom pretty frequently! Yet all the time when we swing back we are a little wiser, a little better, a little cleaner.” Letters written after the climax of City Beautiful offer genuine retrospection on their personal investment and determination that drove their reform endeavors, as well as the impact of those efforts.

Reading the letters of J. Horace McFarland and Mira Lloyd Dock humanizes two individuals who together held massive influence in Harrisburg’s City Beautiful movement. While both reformers can accurately be criticized for a vision of reform that ultimately led to the displacement of an entire community (see Rachel Williams, “History and Memory of the Old Eighth Ward,” and Andrew Dyrli Hermeling, “Look Up, Look Out: Discrepant Stories from the Old Eighth Ward,” in this issue), their friendship was nonetheless an archetype for the kind of interconnected and personalized involvement they desired for the movement. In retaining this close connection for the remainder of their lives, they were a powerful example of the spirit of reform as they envisioned it, and the collective but imperfect humanitarian investment in the welfare of Harrisburg’s citizens.

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NOTES


2. Collections at the Pennsylvania State Archives used for this research include MG-85m.1 J. Horace McFarland Papers and MG-43m.2 Dock Family Papers. The authors photographed relevant letters from these collections in January 2018, and the correspondence is available as an exhibit through the Digital Harrisburg website: https://www.digitalharrisburg.com/exhibits/citybeautiful/.

3. Dock to the Pennsylvania Forestry Association, November 10, 1906, MG-43m.2, Box 5, Folder 45, Dock Family Papers, Pennsylvania State Archives. Forest Leaves was an early serial publication of the Pennsylvania Forestry Association.


5. L. Bitler to Dock, March 21, 1901, MG-43m.2, Box 5, Dock Family Papers; McFarland to Dock, September 29, 1905, MG-85m.1, Box 1, McFarland Papers; Rimby, Mira Lloyd Dock, 42.


8. McFarland to Dock, October 30, 1902, MG-43m.2, Box 6, Dock Family Papers.

9. McFarland to Dock, April 17, 1906, and September 29, 1905, MG-85m.1, Box 1, McFarland Papers.

10. McFarland to Dock, October 15, 1903, in ibid.


12. McFarland to Dock, November 22, 1901, MG-85m.1, Box 1, McFarland Papers.


15. McFarland to Dock, November 23, 1915, MG-85m.1, Box 1, McFarland Papers.


